



EVOLUTION OF ADULT EDUCATION TO LIFELONG LEARNING IN INDIA: A VITAL STRATEGY FOR ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL LITERACY UNDER NEP 2020

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ABSTRACT

Education is a critical factor in human resource development and plays a vital role in societal advancement. The concept of “Education for All” has been a global priority for decades. Adult education serves as an effective means to promote literacy, enhance knowledge, and engage all segments of society, regardless of age, region, or religion. Over time, adult education has evolved into lifelong learning, encompassing people of all ages and regions, with a particular focus on marginalized communities, including economically disadvantaged groups. This study examines the New Education Policy (NEP) 2020, which emphasizes adult education and lifelong learning as key strategies for achieving 100% literacy. The NEP 2020 aims to bridge the educational gap between the least and most educated, expand access to resources, and enhance life satisfaction for all. The study traces the evolution of adult education in India over the decades and highlights how NEP 2020 seeks to develop skills and implement training programs to empower everyone to contribute to society, recognizing the importance of lifelong learning for all.

KEYWORDS: Adult Education, Lifelong Learning, Universal Literacy, Education for All, NEP 2020

INTRODUCTION

The rapid overreliance on technology with the rise of Digital India has introduced numerous challenges that must be overcome to ensure fairness and inclusivity across all social groups. To build a participative, inclusive, and thriving society, addressing literacy and skill development is crucial. The long-awaited National Education Policy (NEP) integrates past efforts and builds upon them to achieve universal literacy in India.

The five stages of the adult education program in India—Fundamental Literacy (1882–1947), Social Education (1948–64), Functional Literacy (1965–77), Developmental Literacy (1978–2008), and Lifelong Learning (2009 onwards)—illustrate the transition from adult education to lifelong learning. These stages reflect various initiatives aimed at reducing illiteracy and ensuring that every individual in society acquires the knowledge and skills needed for success and productive societal contributions.

According to the 2011 census, India’s average literacy rate has risen from a mere 18.33% in 1951 to 74.04% post-independence. However, the country still has the highest number of illiterate people, approximately 287 million as per the same census. UNESCO reported that, as of 2022, there are 771 million illiterate individuals worldwide, with women comprising the majority who continue to struggle with basic reading and writing skills. The pandemic has exacerbated the situation, with nearly 24 million students at risk of never returning to formal education, 11 million of whom are female.

The theme of International Literacy Day 2022, “Transforming Literacy Learning Spaces,” provides an opportunity to rethink the fundamental importance of literacy and learning

environments. It emphasizes promoting resilience and ensuring that all students receive high-quality, equitable, and inclusive education. As per UNESCO’s declaration, it is essential to “enrich and transform existing learning spaces through an integrated approach and enable literacy learning in the perspective of lifelong learning” to ensure no one is left behind. These UNESCO findings closely align with NEP 2020, which views universal literacy as an aspirational goal and centres on “equitable and inclusive access to quality education for all.”

OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the NEP 2020 recommendations for adult education and lifelong learning.
2. To explore the decade-long transition from adult education to lifelong learning in India.
3. To identify NEP 2020’s role in promoting and advancing adult education and lifelong learning initiatives in India.

METHODOLOGY

The research utilized a predominantly qualitative content analysis method. Data was gathered from secondary sources, including policy documents, newspapers, websites, research articles, and books.

Adult education and lifelong learning

Adult education includes reading skills, basic education, technical (skill) training, equivalency education, and relevant scientific knowledge for individuals over the age of 15 who have not received formal education. Lifelong learning, on the other hand, involves acquiring and enhancing knowledge, skills, and personal traits throughout life to promote well-being. It encompasses the decisions adults face and the challenges they encounter in their daily lives, whether attending a formal

education program or evaluating the credibility of information (Lamb, 2005).

Every individual has an inherent right to basic literacy, education, and the ability to earn a living. Literacy and basic education open up new opportunities for self-improvement, civic participation, economic growth, and lifelong learning, supporting both personal and professional development. On a broader scale, literacy and basic education significantly boost the success of other development initiatives at social and national levels. Global data reveals a strong correlation between literacy rates and GDP per capita (NEP, 2020:51). To expedite the crucial goal of achieving 100% literacy, powerful and well-resourced government interventions in adult education are essential. These programs will facilitate greater community involvement and help integrate technology effectively.

The Transition from Adult Education to Lifelong Learning in India

Tracing the origins of adult education in India is challenging due to the oral tradition and regional diversity throughout history. However, adult education has been a vital part of Indian culture since ancient times, when learning was highly valued (Shah, 2009, 2010; Mandal, 2013b). The concept of adult education varies across nations, and in India, it has evolved significantly over time. Before independence, the focus was primarily on the “3Rs” - reading, writing, and arithmetic. After independence, this focus shifted from basic literacy to lifelong learning. To understand this transition, it is essential to identify five key stages:

1. The Notion of Fundamental Literacy (1882-1947):

During the pre-independence era under British rule, adult education centred around basic literacy, with night schools teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic over a two-year program. The curriculum also included health, hygiene, first aid, and historically significant topics. National leaders and social reformers, such as Devendra Nath Tagore and Keshub Chandra Sen, initiated efforts to educate the illiterate. The Brahmo Samaj, for instance, focused on educating uneducated women in Bengal during the 19th century, and literacy classes and libraries were established by social activists in the early 20th century.

2. The Notion of Social Education (1948-64): In 1948, the concept of social education was introduced and integrated with the Community Development Programme. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad emphasized that adult education should extend beyond literacy, equipping citizens with the skills needed to participate in an egalitarian society. Post-independence, the scope of adult education expanded to include citizenship education, health and well-being, vocational skills, and socio-economic development. In 1963, the Mohan Sinha Mehta committee further developed the idea of social education, emphasizing social issues alongside literacy.

3. The Notion of Functional Literacy (1965-77): During this phase, the concept of adult education advanced beyond

basic literacy. It was recognized that literacy alone was insufficient for personal and national growth. Functional literacy programs aim to integrate literacy with practical skills and vocational training. Programs like Functional Literacy for Adult Women, Non-Formal Education, and the Farmers Functional Literacy Programme were introduced to enhance individuals' functional efficiency and support India's self-sufficiency goals.

4. The Notion of Developmental Literacy (1978-2008):

Influenced by Paulo Freire's theory of conscientization, adult education during this period emphasized not just literacy but also social awareness and human development. The National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) was launched, reflecting this broader vision. However, despite this expanded perspective, the focus on basic literacy remained dominant in policies and programs, reinforced by the National Policy on Education (1986, revised in 1992) and the National Literacy Mission launched in 1988.

5. The Notion of Lifelong Learning (2009 onwards):

In a globalized world, lifelong learning has become increasingly important. On International Literacy Day in 2009, the Indian government launched the Saakshar Bharat Programme to address the challenges of globalization and promote lifelong learning. This program aimed to drastically reduce adult illiteracy and foster a culture of lifelong learning within communities. As the concept of “Sustainable Lifelong Learning” emerges, it is now incorporated into the NEP 2020 framework.

NEP 2020 and Adult Education

The NEP 2020 outlines a comprehensive curriculum for adult education, including foundational literacy and numeracy, basic education, critical life skills, vocational skills, and continuing education. Special infrastructure, such as Adult Education Centres (AECs) and Vocational Training Centres (VTCs), will be established to support adult learners, with highly skilled teachers guiding the programs. Achieving the goal of 100% literacy will require innovative policies that leverage advanced technologies and encourage active community participation.

The policy emphasizes the importance of sharing resources across educational institutions to optimize the use of human and material resources. Effective monitoring and supervision of adult education programs will be essential, and efforts will be made to ensure that school dropouts and unenrolled individuals are reached. Access to both digital and physical reading materials will be expanded by strengthening and modernizing libraries. Central and state governments will oversee the distribution of books to ensure they are accessible, especially to disadvantaged groups.

To support adult learners and further the goals of Digital India and Atmanirbhar Bharat, the policy advocates for the development of online courses, applications, satellite TV channels, ICT-equipped libraries, and other technology-driven resources. These initiatives will enable the delivery of quality education through online and blended learning modes.

NEP 2020 - Adult Education and Lifelong Learning Programs

NEP 2020 aims to address the lack of access to educational opportunities for individuals of all ages, from young children to adults. The policy emphasizes integrating young children (ages 3-6) into formal education and ensuring that every child achieves foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) by the age of eight. It also highlights the importance of adult education and lifelong learning, alongside early childhood care and education (ECCE). NEP 2020 offers several recommendations to ensure all children complete Class 12 and to tackle the issue of school dropouts.

Historically, adult literacy has not been a top priority, as adult education policies and programs have often been implemented as short-term efforts. However, with initiatives like the National Adult Education Programme (1978), the National Policy on Education (1986), and the National Literacy Mission (1988), the focus shifted from purely functional literacy to a more comprehensive approach. This approach aimed not only to provide foundational literacy but also to foster a social conscience, enabling individuals with limited opportunities to actively participate in development rather than remain passive bystanders.

Despite improvements in the overall literacy rate, the number of illiterate people in India remains significant. In the 15+ age group, there are 25.76 crore illiterates, with 9.08 crore men and 16.68 crore women. India accounts for 35% of the world's illiterate population. Illiteracy is a major barrier to societal progress and must be addressed seriously to ensure overall development. To combat this issue, the Indian government has launched the 'New India Literacy Programme (NILP)' to support states and union territories in promoting literacy among the illiterate population.

The new India literacy programme (NILP)

On February 16, 2022, the Education Ministry approved the New India Literacy Programme (NILP) for the next five years, emphasizing the connection between learning and the overall advancement of citizens in the 21st century. The NILP's objectives are grounded in the NEP 2020, focusing on non-literate individuals over the age of 15 who do not traditionally fall under the category of "adult education." The program aims to shift from the term "Adult Education" to "Education for All," aligning with NEP 2020's vision.

Over the five fiscal years from 2022 to 2027, NILP seeks to fully integrate all components of adult education with NEP 2020. Working in collaboration with NIOS, NCERT, and the National Informatics Centre, the program utilizes the Online Teaching, Learning, and Assessment System (OTLAS) to reach 5 crore learners over five years, specifically targeting foundational literacy and numeracy. NILP is structured into five components: basic education, critical life skills, vocational skill development, foundational literacy, numeracy, and continuing education. Implementation will be carried out by online volunteers, with schools serving as the primary units. Surveys of beneficiaries and volunteer instructors will be conducted in

schools, and volunteer workshops, orientations, and training sessions may be held in person.

Suggestions

- Promoting Lifelong Learning:** To foster interest in lifelong learning, various media channels, including print, radio, television, and social media, should be leveraged. Social media, in particular, can effectively communicate the benefits and importance of literacy to a broad audience.
- Pedagogy vs. Andragogy:** While formal education for children is based on pedagogy, which aligns with child psychology, adult education is founded on andragogy, which is rooted in adult psychology. Given these differences, it is not appropriate to treat adult education as a mere component of the education department. Separate plans, activities, and strategies are essential, necessitating the establishment of a distinct Directorate dedicated to adult education.
- Counselling Services:** As adult education evolves and the educational experiences of adult learners change, the need for counselling services becomes increasingly important. Adult learners require support to navigate their new roles, assess their needs, and make necessary adjustments. Therefore, enlisting the help of counsellors or social workers is crucial to assist individuals in this transition.
- Role of Social Workers/Counsellors:** Social workers and counsellors play a vital role in achieving the goals of adult education. They can raise awareness about the importance of adult education, form youth groups, and collaborate with various organizations. Their efforts will contribute to the overarching goal of achieving 100% literacy, as envisioned by NEP 2020.
- Inspirational Note:** "You can't go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending."

CONCLUSION

The effective delivery of high-quality education within communities relies significantly on various platforms and policies that implement adult education programs. Success in policy implementation depends on a group of knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced stakeholders working towards common goals. Adult education and lifelong learning programs are crucial for overcoming barriers to personal development, regardless of age, occupation, lifestyle, or existing skills. NEP 2020 acknowledges the significance of adult and lifelong learning and proposes several initiatives to advance these areas. These include enhancing adult literacy, offering flexible and accessible learning opportunities, integrating Vocational Education and Training (VET) into the mainstream education system, and establishing a National Institute for Open Schooling. Consequently, NEP 2020 serves as a valuable framework for effectively implementing lifelong learning and adult education programs, thereby contributing to the country's overall development by equipping adults with essential skills for active societal participation.

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